

KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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The Office of the Citizen

By Joseph Tussman

To be a member of a democratic society is to find oneself saddled with a public office.

One of the basic difficulties in our attempt to understand democratic society and the place of the individual in it is that it combines, or confuses, two different sets of ideas and activities.

First, when we think of government, we are likely to conjure up the conception of a dignified, deliberate forum or assembly—a senate, a jury, a constitutional convention (which looms large in our folklore)—a group of selected, qualified persons facing together a common problem, arriving at a common decision. We see them, if they are successful, clarifying the issues before them by a process of ordered, reasonable discussion, marshalling experience and evidence, speaking freely and fearlessly, responsible in partisanship, objective in judgment. It is a spectacle of disciplined human beings reasoning independently and together, deciding wisely as the result of an enlightening, cooperative process.

We are, to be sure, seldom treated to this spectacle in all its glory, but even our cynicism and disillusionment reflects the existence in our minds of this ideal or model as a basis of expectation and criticism. However much our practice falls short, the conception of the deliberative forum remains as our conception of how, at many points, the governing process should go on.

In contrast to this familiar model, we must place another, even more familiar—the marketplace. This is the arena into which each of us brings his needs and desires, his hopes, his talents and skills and meets others in open competition. Here we buy and sell and trade. We bargain, persuade, make deals, compromise.

We try to get what we want and make the most of what we have. We try to be shrewd, fast, canny, and expect others to be the same or to pay the price. In this world we are producers and consumers, sellers and customers, and most of us have at least one foot in this

The art of making decisions is not identical with the art of bargaining.

world. Much of our culture, our habits and attitudes, can hardly be understood without an appreciation of the pervasive influence of the marketplace.

As we consider the forum and the marketplace and the relation between them, a few observations are called for:

First, the attitude and skills presupposed and needed for the successful operation of each are radically different. The cooperative and the competitive processes are not the same. Deliberating and bargaining are two different processes. Statesmanship and salesmanship are distinct professions. The art of making decisions is not identical with the art of bargaining.

Second, there may be considerable “incompatibility” between the two sets of attitudes and skills. That is, they may tend to weaken and destroy each other. Within a single person one seems to grow at the expense of the other, and they coexist only in an uneasy truce. The same uneasiness is often found in the relations between individuals who are predominantly one type or the other.

Third, there has historically been considerable conflict about the relative status of these two institutions. Sometimes the marketplace or “mechanism of the market” has been seen as virtually supplanting the deliberative forum as the shaper of society’s destiny. Sometimes the marketplace is seen as an irrational, disturbing influence to be curbed or supplanted by more deliberate decision-making institutions.

Finally, it is possible, with reference to the forum and the marketplace, to express both the hopes and the fears of students of society who saw the rise of popular democracy in the 19th century. The hope was that the masses of men could be given, through public education, the habits and attitudes needed for the successful operation of the deliberative forum—to which, by the extension of suffrage, they were being admitted. The fear was that the deliberative forum—rational government—would be swamped and corrupted by the habits and attitudes of the marketplace.

That hope is still our greatest challenge; that fear is still our danger.

The basic insistence of democracy is that no one can properly be subject to the law who is not also, in a meaningful sense, a rightful participant in the process by which the system of law is created and developed. Democracy, we say, is “self-government.” By this we do not mean that everyone can do whatever he pleases. We mean that the same person who finds himself a “subject” of a system of government and law is also, in another capacity and at the proper time and place, a sharer in the making of the law and in the process of governing. To be a member is to be both a subject and a ruler.

Thus, to be a member of a democratic society is to find oneself saddled with a public office, with a public role as well as a private station. It is this dual status—private person and public official—that makes the theory and the practice of democratic life so difficult and demanding.

It is hardly necessary in an age of individualism to stress the importance of the “private” sphere. Each person is the center of a cluster of values, aims, desires, attachments. He has his career, which expresses his bent, his own conception of his life as it should be lived, and lays claim to broad tolerance for his unique and private goods. His private scope is, of course, limited by the external necessities of group life, by the rules of the road, by the law of the land—which we accept more or less as a matter of course if they satisfy our sense of fairness or justice. But within these limits we are free to pursue our private lives.

But much as this is, it is not the whole story. The citizen has yet—if democracy is not wasted on him—to play his public role, to discharge

the duties of his public office, to act like and to be a ruler, to take his place in the deliberative forum.

We do not need to be reminded today of the stakes that ride on the wisdom of our political decisions, of the penalty for political folly. But perhaps we do need to be reminded that one of the chief tasks of public education is to prepare us for the adequate discharge of our public office.

It may throw some light on the ways in which the democratic citizen can fail if we consider the main ways in which an aristocratic government can fail.

First, there is the familiar situation in which the aristocracy places the private interest of its members or of the ruling class generally ahead of the “public good” or general welfare of the community as a whole. Such a failure to constitute itself a proper guardian of the general welfare can, as a failure in aim, be regarded as a moral failure.

Second, an aristocracy can fail, even when well intentioned, to develop the intellectual and deliberative disciplines needed to produce decisions and policies that will achieve the desired results.

It is obvious that the shift from aristocratic to democratic government does not by itself constitute a remedy for these failures or a cure for moral and intellectual irresponsibility. It might, in fact, increase these dangers. For the democratic citizen may, in his ruling capacity—as a voter, for example—unconsciously or deliberately confuse his private interest with the public interest of which he is the guardian. And he may through lack of education or through preoccupation with his private pursuits fail to cultivate





the cognitive and deliberate skills and disciplines needed in the public decision-making process.

One thing is clear, however. The democratic citizen holds a public office, and it is a crucial office. A society that bestows this office on all its citizens cannot afford to fail in educating its citizens to discharge that office responsibly.

An analysis of the elements of responsibility will be facilitated, I believe, if we first consider briefly what a public question or public issue is.

In an obvious and general sense, a public issue is an issue properly raised in a public forum and calling for some public, i.e., governmental, action.

First, public issues are “practical” issues rather than “theoretical” ones. That is, the question is one of action, not of truth. To take an example from the not too distant past: “Is the theory of evolution true?” This question, while of widespread and burning interest, is not a public question as here defined. However,

“Should we prohibit the teaching of the theory of evolution in the public schools?” is a public question. It calls for some action. Obviously, one’s view of the truth of the theory might determine one’s position on whether the theory should be taught. It is certainly relevant. But the distinction between a question of truth and a question of action is nevertheless important. A governmental body may speak with authority about whether something should be undertaken. Its pronouncements, generally, about “truth” have no such authority.

Second, a public issue involves action by government. Such governmental action will, of course, impinge on private action by prohibiting or requiring that certain things be done. But the public question is always whether government should do something. For example, whether I should send my child to a public or to a private school is a private question. Whether the government should grant tax exemption to private schools or even whether private schools should be allowed to exist, is a public question.

Public questions, then, are questions of this sort:

Should the government enforce racial integration in schools? Should the government subsidize farmers? Should the government engage in a large foreign aid program? Should Party A or Party B be entrusted with the direction of the executive branch of government for the next four years?

With this in mind, let us turn to a consideration of various aspects of responsibility involved in the office of the citizen.

When we are called upon to act in our capacity as public officers—as voters, for example—the crucial point is that we are being

asked for our judgment on a public question. We are not being asked for an expression of our private interests. The first problem of responsibility is to see this demand and to respond to it.

Suppose, for example, that the question is whether or not a system of universal military

We are being asked for our judgment on a public question.

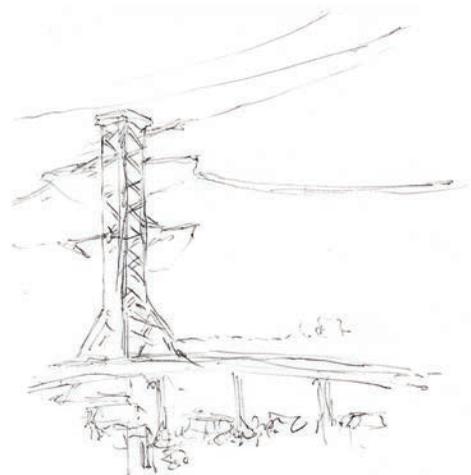
training should be established. I, as a citizen, am being asked whether in my judgment such a step would promote the general well-being of the community. I am not being asked whether I would like to be in the army or would like to have my children drafted. It is, I think, sheer dereliction of duty, sheer moral irresponsibility, to answer the second question when you are asked the first—that is, to respond to a question of public interest in terms of one's private interest.

The basic assumptions here are that there is a distinction between the public question and the private question, between the public interest and one's private interest, and that responsible action—i.e., addressing oneself honestly to the public question—is possible, even though often difficult, and is required. This is, it must be noted, a “controversial” position, generally suspect and unpopular but nevertheless, I think, correct.

So much cant and hypocrisy has surrounded the discussion of the “public interest” that one is tempted to dismiss it as mere public relations

rhetoric in which we package and sell our private wares. But the rhetorical corruption of a vital distinction does not lessen the significance of the distinction.

There is, perhaps, no better example than this of the confusion of the marketplace and the forum or of the influence of economic theory upon political theory. Everyone is familiar with the *laissez-faire* theory that if each diligently pursues his own private interest, the public interest is automatically promoted. No one, on this view, has to worry about the public interest. It takes care of itself. It is the automatic by-product of private striving for private goods. This conception—generally abandoned in the economic sphere—still has considerable vogue in our thinking about politics and is often regarded as peculiarly “democratic.” It is attractive, I think, because it really dispenses with the need for any notion of responsibility for the public good. It gives a sort of indirect moral sanction to single-minded self-interest. We find it very consoling. But it is nevertheless an escape from the burdens of moral responsibility.



A more serious attempt to bridge the gap between the public interest and private or “self-interest” is based on a distinction between “self-interest” and “enlightened self-interest.” Enlightened self-interest, it is said, is identical with the public interest. While “self-interest” may be identical with what

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one immediately wants or likes, “enlightened self-interest” is what one would want if he were wise, or far-sighted, or mature, or “social.” On this view, being “responsible” is acting in terms of these wider considerations rather than the “immediate” ones.

The advantage of this position seems to be that it does not require that anyone act contrary to his self-interest (enlightened, that is). And since it is widely (and dogmatically) held that we are all necessarily selfish, this view



does not require that one ignore his self-interest. It only requires that men be “enlightened.”

I do not think, myself, that this view is satisfactory, that moral responsibility can be identified with far-sightedness in one’s pursuit of self-interest. But it is a respectable view that deserves consideration.

Before moving on to other questions, we must guard against a possible misconception. To say that a citizen is called on to pass judgment on a question of the public interest is not to suggest that he can easily free himself of the influence of his private station, his private interests, his “bias.” Obviously, our judgment about universal military training will be affected by such things as whether we are of military age, et cetera. But to recognize this only makes us aware of the difficulty of doing what our scheme of government requires that we do. It reminds us of the discipline that the office of the citizen requires. Democracy is not the easiest; it is the hardest form of government.

We have only scratched the surface of the issues, both theoretical and practical, that exist at this point. But essentially, the position taken here is that in discharging his public function, the citizen is being asked his judgment about the public interest and that failure to discipline his private concerns is a failure in moral responsibility. The office of the citizen has at least this much in common with the office of the judge, the legislator, or the administrator.

It is, unfortunately, not the case that “everyone has a right to his opinion.”

Everyone has, of course, all sorts of beliefs and opinions about all sorts of things. Some we

inherit; some we forge for ourselves. Some are true; some are not. A good part of the history of civilization is the process of the creation of disciplines, techniques, and institutions of ordeal by which beliefs are tested, validated, warranted, confirmed, proved. To claim a “right” to a belief is to claim that a belief has survived its ordeal—for the time at least—and has established a “confirmed” status.

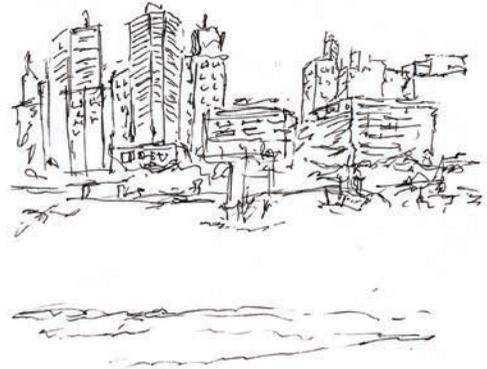
To be cognitively or intellectually responsible is to move some distance toward bridging the gap between merely having beliefs and having a right to our beliefs. Responsibility is not, of course, infallibility. One can be responsible and mistaken. But the responsible mind is always working towards believing only what has a right to be believed.

The adequate study of this problem—the validation of beliefs—would take us into the fields of epistemology and scientific method, logic, semantics—all aspects of the general problem of knowledge—and this is beyond the scope of our present enterprise. But we may indicate, in passing, the general attitudes or qualities of mind that must be cultivated:

First, the drive to clarify and focus. Much discussion is fruitless and frustrating because we are not talking about the same thing or are not sure what is at issue in a controversy. At some point “the issue” needs to be clarified or formulated. This takes practice and training.

Second, the demand for evidence. Our beliefs must sustain themselves in a world of facts—some hard, some flabby. We must cultivate a hospitable and hungry attitude toward the evidential fact.

Third, the sense of validity. Beliefs and facts do not come in heaps. They come organized and



become more organized. They constitute “arguments” and involve inference and deduction.

Most people can make valid inferences and arguments without having studied “logic.” But the practice of argument can be enlightened by a study of the theory of argument.

Finally, summing up all of these, the sense of relevance—the feeling for what has a bearing on the matter at hand, for what can be ignored and for what is crucial. Most fallacies are fallacies of irrelevance.

These are the general qualities of a responsible mind. Education seeks to cultivate and develop them quite apart from their special bearing on politics. But they are as much needed by the citizen as by anyone, and they are more seriously tried and tested in the political area than in most other areas of life.

Any analysis of the qualities required of the citizen must take account of the fact that he is not a solitary decision-maker but is one of a large number of persons manning a decision-making institution. He is a colleague. When he expresses

his judgment, it is in the form “I think we should do so and so,” and the “we” signifies the fact that he is participating with colleagues in the process of arriving at a common, group, decision. It is hardly enough to arrive at a sound position oneself if one fails to make his insights

When the wells of public discussion become poisoned, it is necessary to draw water somewhere else.

effectively available to others. He is, therefore, inescapably involved in communication—listening as well as speaking, reading as well as writing.

The question I wish to pose here is whether there is not a sharp distinction between the kind of communication appropriate for colleagues and the kind of communication we think of as natural between the “salesman” and the “customer.” There is little doubt that “salesmanship” is today a dominant form of communication. It is manipulative in intent. Its concern is with getting others to behave as the salesman wants them to. There is a sort of cold war between competing salesmen and between salesman and consumers. This is so familiar that it is difficult to make the point that there is any other sort of communication. We package and sell toothpaste. We package and sell politicians and parties. We package and sell ideas, ideologies, ways of life. All is propaganda—including education, we are told.

Naïve as this may sound, I wish to suggest that there are relationships between individuals that do call for communication of a different sort—relations that are corrupted and destroyed by the intrusion of manipulative communication, propaganda, and selling. Between friends, between members of a family, between members of a team, salesmanship is a disease. It has no place in the relations between scientists in a laboratory, between doctors in a hospital, or officers on a military staff. It is also, I suggest, out of place between political colleagues—and that includes fellow citizens.

Here again is one of the points at which there is, I believe, a profound confusion between the deliberative forum and the marketplace, a point at which their “incompatibility” is most evident. It seems increasingly clear, also, that whenever a forum is taken over by “salesmanship,” it becomes unfit for the making of serious decisions—we dare not trust its results, and the real decisions need to be made elsewhere. When the wells of public discussion become poisoned, it is necessary to draw water somewhere else.

I leave this highly controversial point without further treatment. But unless the distinction between collegial communication and salesmanship is clearly grasped, I do not see how sanity and responsibility can be preserved in the training of citizens for their tasks.

One further point about the collegial relationship—it has to do with “reasonableness” and “compromise.” Everyone knows that on most issues there is disagreement. Certainty is impossible, and men of goodwill do not always—or even often—agree. In the face of such disagreement, action may, nevertheless, be necessary. Some decisions must be made, and we can’t all,

always, have our way. The necessities of group life and action make some acceptance of this situation necessary. Some “accommodation,” some “reasonableness,” is called for. But to understand and deal with this situation is not easy.

To accept a verdict is not necessarily to change one’s mind. There is an important place in the scheme of things for opposition—continued, responsible opposition. Something is needed that falls between “sabotage” and “conformity,” and this is “as difficult as it is rare.”

And finally, I wish to express a doubt about the equivalence of “being reasonable” with “being willing to compromise.” We are frequently told

that “compromise” is the heart of the democratic process. I think this is a poor and misleading substitute for the notion of being reasonable. It is the marketplace version of reasonableness in the deliberative forum. A compromise may be the best bargain one can strike. It is not necessarily a reasonable decision.

Joseph Tussman (1914-2005) was an educator and activist who taught philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley. Originally given as a public lecture at Syracuse University in 1960, “The Office of the Citizen” can be found at josephussman.wordpress.com. It is reprinted here with the permission of David Tussman.

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